

from over a large area is essential and we hope members will help to secure them.

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FIELD STATION,
VELLORE, SOUTH INDIA,
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RACHEL REUBEN

7. ROOSTING OF THE GREY WAGTAIL [*MOTACILLA CASPICA* (GMELIN)] IN THE THEKKADY WILD LIFE SANCTUARY

A report by Cawkell (1947)¹ is referred to by Dr. Stuart Smith (1950)² as describing 'a small tree at Beirut in the Lebanon, that was the winter roosting place of a flock of twenty to thirty Grey Wagtails'. The following note describes a roost at Thekkady where there were 46 Grey Wagtails at least.

Thanks to the United States Information Service, Trivandrum, I was able to spend 3 nights (March 31, April 1st and 2nd, 1964) in the Edapalayam Tourist Bungalow within the Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary, at an altitude of about 3000 ft.

On April 1, at 6.00 hrs. I saw a few slim, long-tailed birds flying from a small Silver Oak (*Grevillea robusta*), alighting on the branches of a larger tree close by, and then flying off. That evening, at 18.5 hrs., Grey Wagtails started arriving in ones and twos. They alighted on the roof, and ran about and preened themselves (giving me excellent opportunities to make sure of the rump colour). Apart from a few subdued *chip-chip* notes, they made little noise and showed very little excitement. A few of them flew into a larger tree (a Rusty Shield Bearer, I think), only to return at once to the roof. Unfortunately, I was called away before I could see them settling down. At 20.00 hrs. I examined the Silver Oak, and the torch-beam revealed eight birds fast asleep. Most of them were quite conspicuous from below, though all of them were well protected from above by leaves. Some sat with body and tail at a 45-degree angle to the ground; others seemed to be more or less resting flat on the leaves of the twigs where they perched. All those that could be seen well had their heads tucked

¹ CAWKELL, E.M. (1947) : A winter roost of Grey Wagtail. *Brit. Birds* 40 : 213 (original not seen).

² SMITH, S. (1950) : THE YELLOW WAGTAIL : 88.

into the back, and they did not make the slightest movement even when the torch-beam was kept steadily on them. The breasts of these birds were less fluffed out than, for instance, are those of sleeping orioles and ioras. The heights at which the birds were sleeping ranged from 12 feet to 25 feet above ground. Of the 8 birds seen only two were close together; the others were sitting widely separated from one another.

On the 2nd April I could not watch the wagtails. But on the 3rd I was under the Silver Oak some 5 minutes before 6.00 a.m. Exactly at 6.00 a wagtail shot off its perch in the Silver Oak and, twisting and turning in characteristic fashion, alighted on the roof. It stayed only for a moment. Then it flew off to the east. From 6.00 a.m. till 6.09 birds kept erupting from the roost-tree in ones and twos, making it easy for us to count them as they flew out. In all I counted 46 wagtails flying out of that tree. (I was absent for a minute or so during this period, examining another Silver Oak growing a few yards away.)

It was seen that there had been birds even on the lowest branches, just 8 feet above the ground. Every twig and branch above that level seemed to have carried its quota of birds.

The birds from the lowest perches were the first to leave, and some of the last came out of the top branches. Most of the birds had been so well hidden that I could have sworn, at 6 a.m., that there were only some 10 birds in the tree. In fact the butler, who had examined the tree by torchlight the previous night, was ready to wager that there were only 2 birds in the tree!

The Silver Oak preferred by the wagtails was a slim tree about 30 feet tall, standing very near the eaves at the angle between the main block and the kitchen, on the northern side. There was a larger Silver Oak on the southern side of the kitchen block, but there was not a single wagtail in it.

Most of the roosting birds left the tree between 6.00 and 6.05.

On the way to Aranya Nivas on the 31st of March I saw a few Grey Wagtails beside the road. At one place, where there was a trickle of water, two wagtails were quarrelling. Their lower plumage had already become bright yellow. Some of the birds seen on the roof on April 1 had grey chins too. Curiously enough I did not notice a single wagtail anywhere in the lake during the 3 hours spent cruising in search of wild animals on the 1st of April.

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